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THE CLINTON NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

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The single point of agreement among contemporary authors on the subjects of national security and international affairs appears to be that the world has changed as a consequence of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the post-Cold War environment, old rules and relationships have lost at least some of their relevance, leaving leaders and governments to formulate new strategies for meeting the challenges (or lack of challenges) presented by current circumstances. This paper will briefly outline the environmental changes confronting today's leaders, then describe and critique the Clinton Administration's May 1997 National Security Strategy as the blueprint for achieving America's safety, security, and prosperity in this environment. The critique will assert that while admirable for its breadth and ambition, the strategy first lacks a compelling unifying theme, substituting idealistic and utopian goals for concrete interests, and, second, fails to prioritize clearly its proposed interests. This leaves the reader, as well as agencies or organizations attempting to comprehend or implement the strategy, without a hierarchy for resource allocation or a basis for making necessary tradeoffs between competing or conflicting demands. Finally, it will broadly sketch an alternative construct for a regionally focused strategy based on a clear statement and hierarchy of American interests within a regional, multilateral framework.

In the recent past, a single notion guided formulation of national security policy--the concept of "the threat" in all its manifestations. With the passing of the Soviet Union, the overwhelming threat has receded, to be replaced by "destabilizing, dangerous, and, in many cases, unexpected challenges."¹ This

uncertainty has forced formulation of national strategy with little knowledge of what challenges or opportunities lie ahead. At the time of the Soviet Union's collapse, Gen Colin Powell observed

The decline of the Soviet threat has fundamentally changed the concept of threat analysis as a basis for force structure planning. We can still plausibly identify some specific threats--North Korea, a weakened Iraq, perhaps even a hostile Iran. But the real threat is the unknown, the uncertain. In a very real sense, the primary threat to our security is instability and being unprepared to handle a crisis or war that no one expected or predicted.²

Although Gen Powell's comments refer specifically to military threats, the same uncertainty prevails in diplomacy and economics. Unfortunately, policymakers must continue to formulate strategy regardless of how uncertain the environment may become.

Although certain knowledge may be lacking, it is possible to make general observations about the national security environment. First, the cold war bipolar relationship has been replaced by a complex multipolar international system. The loss of the Soviet threat means that well understood organizing principles for foreign and defense policy are gone. The world is less dangerous, but not necessarily more stable. Defining interests and courses of action for pursuing them within the community of nations is the principal challenge facing policy makers. Second, since World War II, US strategy has been global, geared toward countering Soviet influence wherever and whenever it appeared, a consequence of Kennan's strategy of containment.³ In contrast, a multipolar world dictates a strategy focused at a regional level, agile enough to respond to the unique cultural, economic and governmental characteristics of each region and general enough to allow for customized approaches to American leadership.

consistent with national interests in the specific region Third, the growing interdependence of nations in a multipolar world constrains national actions and modifies the nature, relative importance, and patterns of use of national power Interdependence makes influence upon any nation by another more difficult and increases the effectiveness and significance of “soft” forms of power rather than military might

How then has the Clinton Administration proposed to cope with this new environment, identify national interests, formulate objectives, and reorder American policy to ensure their attainment? Unbounded by a unifying threat, the strategy embraces almost every conceivable universalist theme During previous administrations, the need to address a global Soviet menace clearly established the number one priority--uncommitted resources were devoted to lesser remaining priorities As a consequence, idealistic schemes have consistently run afoul of constraints imposed by the real world

The May 1997 National Security Strategy contains no such theoretical constraints but does identify three “core objectives ” first, “To enhance security with effective diplomacy and with military forces that are ready to fight and win,” second, “To bolster America’s economic prosperity,” and third, “To promote democracy abroad ” The first, enhancing security, covers every conceivable “threat” to US security from nuclear annihilation to refugee migrations, offers a hierarchy for evaluating the urgency of the threat, provides a framework for crisis response and makes clear that resource allocation and degree of response must be in accordance with prevailing interests The second, promoting prosperity,

outlines enhancing competitiveness through deficit reduction, gaining access to foreign markets, fostering free trade, and investing domestically in our industries and work force. Here the framework for allocation of resources breaks down and prioritization becomes murky. Does domestic investment outweigh free trade? Will North American prosperity count more than Asian advances? Are any markets more important than others? Lacking a clear hierarchy, the strategy leaves the reader with the impression that all opportunities in all areas of the world are weighted equally and warrant total, simultaneous assault. When considered in the context of stated goals such as protecting biodiversity and limiting transnational transportation of hazardous waste, the complexity of ordering priorities becomes apparent.

The third area, promoting democracy, commits America to defense of emerging democracies, universal human rights, and democratic principles while providing global humanitarian assistance. Everything from integration of emerging nations into free market systems to resisting genital mutilation find a home as national interests. Again, the order of significance, especially as these interests weigh against those in the first and second areas, begs clarification. Answers to the questions of how these ends will be achieved, using what instruments, at what cost in manpower, money or time, go unanswered and unanswerable, and must be seen as the root cause of much of US government confusion concerning agency roles, missions, and responsibilities.⁴

What then is the prescription for improving and clarifying the current strategy? First, the current document contains the requisite pieces, but lacks the

difficult policy choices about priorities. While the first two of the three “core objectives” clearly represent what would be considered vital interests, no clear consensus seems to exist as to what precisely constitute lesser US national interests or the objectives of national security strategy in pursuit of vital interests. It would appear that rather than risk overlooking a single possible interest group in American or international politics, the administration crafted an all inclusive document that serves nobody. A strong, bipartisan and clearly enunciated statement of what the US is trying to do must be the starting point of strategy formulation. A revised strategy should sort interests by degree of significance rather than clumping them by category. Interests included should be limited to those that can possibly be influenced with a specified instrument of power and with a reasonable probability of success.

Second, the limitations of US resources do not permit unilateral action or even consistent US leadership on every issue facing mankind. Promoting regional solutions under the leadership of regional governmental organizations or a leading regional government, with the US contribution limited to the minimum necessary to ensure success consistent with US interests, should become the centerpiece of foreign policy. US leadership or direct intervention should be reserved for those instances where the might and prestige of America are essential for success and the US interest involved clearly justifies the cost and risk of such involvement.

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, US policymakers find themselves with no clear threats, fewer clear rules for establishing interests, increased complexity

in the relationships between participants, and shifts in the utility of traditional instruments of national power. In this environment, they must strive to develop a compelling vision for national direction, galvanize domestic support for clearly stated interests, and creatively influence allies and adversaries alike to attain those interests. The lack of clear interests, failure to prioritize objectives, and excessive pursuit of idealistic and unattainable goals undermine the current National Security Strategy. A reformulation based on more narrowly and clearly defined national interests, priority based allocation of limited US resources, and US concession of leadership to regional powers or multinational organizations would go far toward producing the kind of actionable and attainable strategy essential for the conduct of coherent governmental action.

FOOTNOTES

1 Robert Gates, Statement of the Director of Central Intelligence before the Senate Armed Services Committee, January 22, 1992

2 General Colin Powell, Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, March 4, 1992

3 John Lewis Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy (New York Oxford University Press, 1982) Chapters 2 and 3

4 A National Security Strategy For a New Century (Washington D C U S Government Printing Office, May 1997)